

*The
River
named Provo*

THE STORY OF PROVO, UTAH

by

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Chapter VII

THE RIVER NAMED PROVO

The Provo River with its many potential advantages was the force that influenced the first settlers to establish Fort Utah beside this stream. Likewise, it determined the second fort location and thereafter the City of Provo.

The River as an Early Landmark

The first accurately recorded information of Provo River dates back to September 23, 1776, when two Catholic Priests, Escalante and Dominguez led a small group of men down Spanish Fork Canyon into Utah Valley. Escalante made a detailed record of their voyage from Santa Fe to Utah Valley through which the river flows.

Escalante described four rivers flowing from the east to the valley and claimed they visited at least three of these, including the largest, which was the Provo. Each of the rivers was given a name by the Friars. The name Rio de San Antonio De Padua was given to the stream that has come to be known as the Provo River.

Escalante described not only the Indians who lived near the river but also the plant and animal life that existed in Utah Valley as a result of the streams of water. So impressed were these Christian missionaries about the streams, the quality of the soil, and the abundant plant growth that they proposed the possible establishment of several villages in the valley. Escalante believed the Valley would support a population comparable to the inhabitants that resided in New Mexico.¹ Although fate prevented the return of the Friars, they left the natives with the impression that they would be back and teach them the Christian Religion.

Escalante and Dominguez gave a name of their choice to Provo River, but the Indians earlier had called it Timp-pa-no-quint which, when interpreted, is "Timp, rock; pa, water; no-quint; running water over rocks, or a stream with a rocky bed."¹²

The river was a significant part of the homeland for the Indians for not only did it provide water for their own consumption but also it was the source of much of their food. The Utas along the Provo River were known as Timpanogotzis or fish-eaters.³

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The Spanish Priests reached the river north and east from Utah Lake and then followed its course to the lake and then on September 24 and 25 near the spot the river enters the lake they told the Utas of their religious convictions and agreed with them that one day they would return.⁴

The Provo River was the terminal of the travels of the Dominguez-Escalante Christians in their direct route westward. It was here they said farewell to the natives as they turned southward through Utah and thence back to New Mexico.

The Provo River area was more than the homeland of the Utas in the immediate vicinity, it was "the chief rendezvous for fishing purposes for all the Utah Indians within a 150-mile radius."⁵

The Provo River was an important stream for the early trappers and traders. While the records are not complete, bits of evidence indicate fur-bearing animals were common in this vicinity and attracted trappers and traders. In 1826 and again in 1827 Jedediah Smith passed through Utah en route to Southern California and likely crossed or was at the Provo River.⁶

John C. Fremont, in 1843, en route from California, came that way; and again in 1845, coming from the east, he was at Utah Lake and Provo River.

Among the early mountain men who were at and who followed the stream, was Provost for whom the river and the city later were named.

It was at or near the Provo River that Provost had his horrifying experience in 1824 wherein one bad Gauché, a savage, gave appropriate signals; and he and his men slaughtered most of the associates of Provost's party.

Provo River, Destination for Mormon Settlers

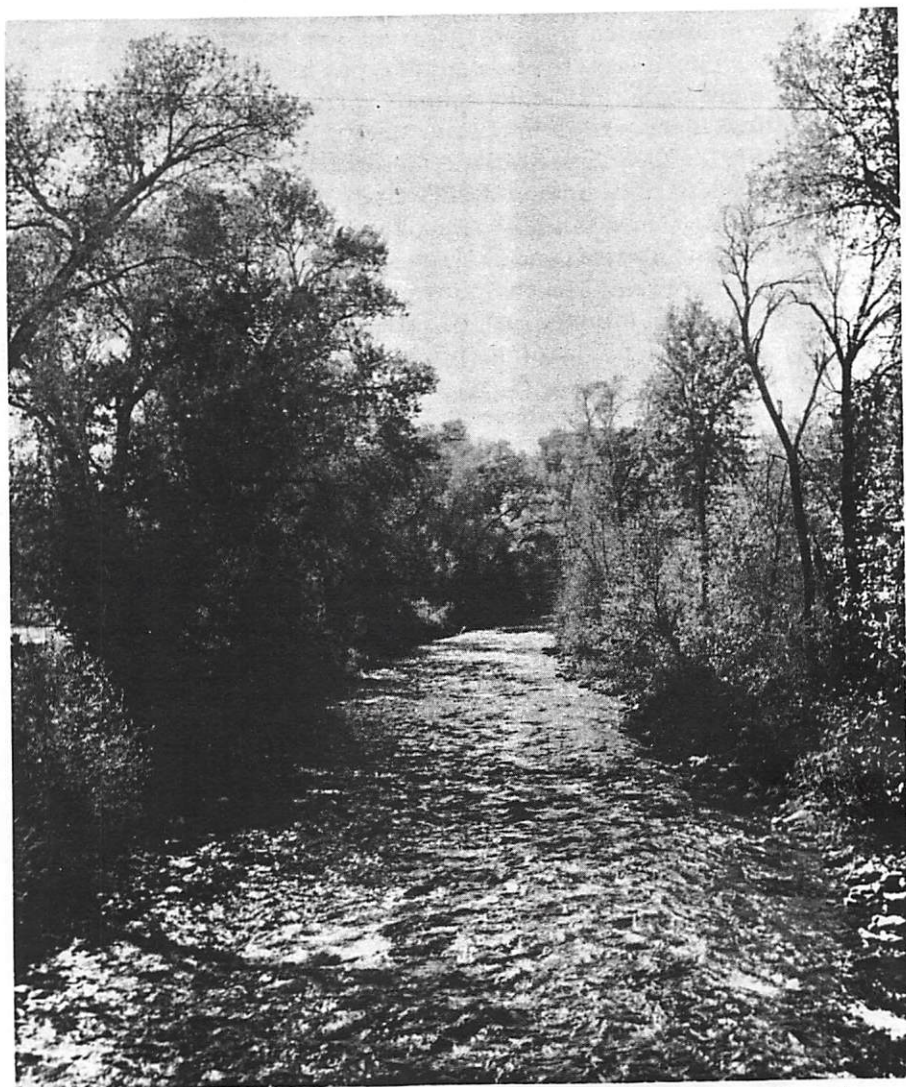
The first camps were only hastily established in Salt Lake Valley before Mormon explorers were at Utah Lake and beheld the river emerging from the Wasatch Mountains and terminating in the lake. They detected at once the value of this stream. More people soon came to the Great Basin following the July, 1847, caravan; and therewith came more livestock needing pasture. Animals were driven southward for pasturing purposes requiring herders to pursue their animals. The River therefore was known to the Mormons before the first settlers came to its banks as permanent residents.

People in their isolated situation knew that water was a necessity in the arid country of the Great Basin. The expansion of added settlements was a necessity in the plans of the Church leadership if the Kingdom of God were to become a reality. Hence, decision was made that beside or near the Provo River was to be the first settlement south of Salt Lake Valley.

The warning Jim Bridger had given Brigham Young about the bad Indians at and near the Provo River could not long deter the plan for a chain of communities to extend outward from the original settlement. As expected, the approach of the first Mormon Caravan in Utah County required negotiations between the Mormons and the Utas before the River was crossed.

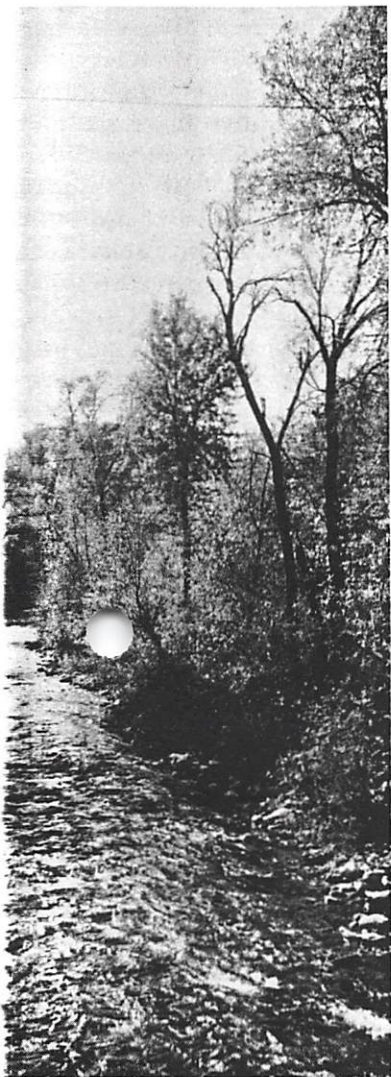
Had it not been for the river there would have been no Fort Utah nor City of Provo. Water for man, animals, plant life, food, navigation, and power were all necessary for permanency of the proposed settlement.

Fort Utah became a reality and existed as the first home for the Mormons in Utah Valley. While its over-flowing waters caused a move to the little colony from the river side, the second fort could not have been built without the benefits of the river water close by.



The beautiful Provo River flowing into Utah Lake was soon located after the first white settlers came into the Salt Lake Valley. Water for man and beast, water for land on the parching soil to produce food, water for power for their beginning industries all contributed toward the decision to be made that determined the location of Provo.

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Water for irrigation

George W. Bean built the first small irrigation ditch that brought Provo River water to the land and he claims to have matured and harvested the first crop of grain in Utah Valley.⁷

Farm and garden produce were early necessities. Plots of the farm land were soon made and allocated to the several families who were to be permanent residents. At that early time the constitution of the State of Deseret and the Act of Congress that created the Territory of Utah were both silent about the rights and restraints of irrigation water in the Great Basin. However, the magnitude of this problem was soon detected; and the Legislative Assembly of the Territory commenced enacting laws that provided both privileges and restrictions of water usage.

The Provo Canal and Irrigation Company was incorporated January 17, 1850. This was the first in a series of laws directing and controlling Provo River water.⁸

The eagerness of the Provo settlers to turn the river waters onto their land displayed their energy for produce from the soil but it also created some problems. Within a short time people were building their residences along the river banks the entire distance from Fort Utah to the mouth of Provo Canyon. This action was in violation of a policy that had been proclaimed by Brigham Young. The Church President earlier had come to Fort Utah and found the over-flowing river creating swamps south and east of the Fort. It was he who directed a small party to the spot where the newer fort was to be built, and it was he who gave the order for the people to build the fort and there to live within it as a means of protection against the Indians.

Many of the local Church and civil leaders disregarded the President's order and built their houses out of the fort north and eastward along the river banks in order to have the full advantage the river afforded for irrigation purposes.

This eagerness to acquire water by the early settlers necessitated legislative action. The law-making body passed an act March 3, 1852, planning penalties on those who usurped water belonging to another. The law stated,

*"That if any person or persons after there shall have been a division of water . . . made in any . . . precinct in this Territory, for irrigation or other purposes, shall in any way infringe upon the rights of any person or persons, they shall be liable in an action of trespass of the parties damaged; and liable to be fined at the discretion of the court having jurisdiction."*⁹

There were some violations of the law, and there were fines imposed and paid.

The River as a Source of Food

Parley P. Pratt, probably was the first of the early Mormons to note the importance of Provo River and Utah Lake as a source of food. July 8, 1849, he wrote his brother Orson a letter declaring he had been at Utah Lake and described the abundance of fish therein by saying, "I saw thousands [of fish] caught by hand . . . I could buy a hundred, which would each weigh a pound for a piece of tobacco as large as my finger. They simply put their hand into the stream, and throw them out as fast as they can pick them up."¹⁰

Elder Pratt noted the Indians as well as the white were catching fish abundantly. Fish easily obtained for food was the justification for naming the Indians in this vicinity "fish-eaters."

George W. Bean wrote in his diary that it was soon learned that the Provo River was the "great place of gathering of all the Ute tribes" in the spring because of the abundance of fish moving up the stream from the lake to their spawning areas. Bean declared the suckers and mullets were so numerous that the river was filled from bank to bank as thick as they could swim. He declared, "The Indians could feast [on fish] from morning to night for weeks."¹¹

The abundance of fish in Provo River was not a one season situation. In the early summer of 1855 George W. Armstrong, Dimick B. Huntington, and a "Brother Windsor" and three children "with a 300-foot-long seine" claimed to have "caught a thousand suckers." It was written, "the Indians took half of these and loaded them on four horses" with as much as they could carry."¹²

Claim had been made by some that the "June suckers" were so abundant in early summer, the flow of the river would be diverted onto the land thereby creating damage to early crops.

In one of his letters to his wife Captain Jesse A. Gove, of the United States Army, described the abundance of fish "of every kind" in Utah Lake. These were enjoyed, he declared, by the military men at the army post near Cedar Fort.

The River as a Source of Power

Provo River has been described as a rapidly running stream thereby providing a good source of needed power. Ideas of the use of water for power were born and nurtured the season the first settlers crossed Provo River and noted the depth and width of the stream and particularly the force with which the water was flowing. The plan of using this stream for manufacturing purposes prompted the writing of an epistle by the Quorum of the Twelve to Orson Pratt then in England urging the organizing of converts

to the Church who possessed special skills in various manufacturing areas to come to Zion where they would find it very profitable creating new and needed industries. Specifically the epistle stated it would be "very profitable particularly because of the abundance of water power, with which to propel machinery of every kind, without the aid of steam."¹³

The use of Provo River water for power purposes may be noted in the legislative act that created the Provo Canal and Irrigation Company in 1853. Orson Hyde, George A. Smith and George W. Armstrong were the leading organizers. The company was allocated one-half of the stream for operating machinery and irrigation purposes if it did not usurp water needed below the point of diversion and more may be diverted if necessary under similar conditions and without added legislation.

Plans for the use of water for power were then under way four days following this act of the Legislative Assembly, the Provo Manufacturing Company was organized. Associated with the above-named men in the Canal Company were Edson Whipple, Evan M. Green, Dominicus Carter, Edson Berney and David Canfield.¹⁴

December 26, 1852, George A. Smith wrote a letter reporting new industry in Provo, much of which was operated by water power, including three saw mills, a carding machine, two grist mills, a sash factory, "three cabinet shops, two of them running buzz (circular) saws and turning lathes by water."¹⁵

In one of his very descriptive letters of the Utah Valley, Captain Jesse A. Gove, writing to his wife, stated, "The excellent facilities which the Provo (River) affords for manufacturing purposes have been taken advantage of, and there are already flouring and other mills, driven by water power. A woolen factory, a machine shop, a pottery, and various other manufacturers have been established . . . Bridges have been erected over the Provo, the first rather primitive, which was carried away by an unusually rapid current in (18)-'54. That [bridge] across the main stream is 120 feet long and over which the new military road through the Territory passes; the contract for building it was \$6,500."¹⁶

The use of Provo River water as a source of power for manufacturing purposes was a distinct asset as it gave aid to the plan of cooperative industry in creating and meeting most of the needs of the people. The Church policy was opposed to the settlers purchasing any item outside the Mormon establishment.

The uses of Provo River water as a source of power have changed greatly during this century, but water continues to play an important role in the industries in and near Provo.

Miscellaneous Uses and Problems of Provo River

An important use of Provo River during early history was that of floating logs that were cut northward from Utah Lake extending into the mountains. Many of the houses and yards were built of logs and poles that were cut and dragged to the river to be floated to the spot where needed along the river-side below.

One or more of the Utah Valley explorers, before Fort Utah was established, reported that east of the lake was an abundance of timber that could be floated down the river and, if desired, could be floated along the lake into the Jordan River for use in the Salt Lake Valley.

The river at times presented problems. Several seasons of high water were such that bridges were washed away and abutments were destroyed.

The very high waters of 1852 changed the channel of Provo River, washed away the bridge, and destroyed "several hundred acres of grain."

Men were at work in March of 1853 in rebuilding the bridge and rerouting the river to its former channel.¹⁷

Again in 1854 George A. Smith reported, "A new bridge is about completed across the Provo River which will be a good one; one hundred and seventy feet in length with substantial abutments and piers."¹⁸

Crossing the river was a troublesome experience during the high water seasons when the bridges were washed away. Thomas Bullock, in company with President Young and others en route to Provo, wrote,

"At 2:20 p.m. we resumed our journey [from Pleasant Grove] taking the new road to the mouth of Provo Canyon. Here we found the crossing of the river too rocky; hence we went down the stream on the north side and crossed where the bridge formerly stood. The water was running very rapidly and into some of the wagon beds, but we got through without any serious accident."

The benefits of the Provo River were apparent in the Spring of 1858 as the Mormons north of the point of the mountain began their move southward to precede the approach of the Johnston Army. Ward and neighborhood groups tended to travel and remain in Church organization patterns. Most of those who left their more northern houses camped along the Provo River. For example, March 23, 1858, "a special meeting was held in the warehouse for the purpose of making arrangements for moving south . . . When the general move took place in April, 1858, the majority of the Big Cottonwood Saints settled on the bottom north of the Provo River . . ."²⁹

Likewise, the people from Ogden were appropriately organized and came to the banks of the Provo River to remain until the United States Army was firmly established west of Utah Lake and the call came to the people to return to their former houses.

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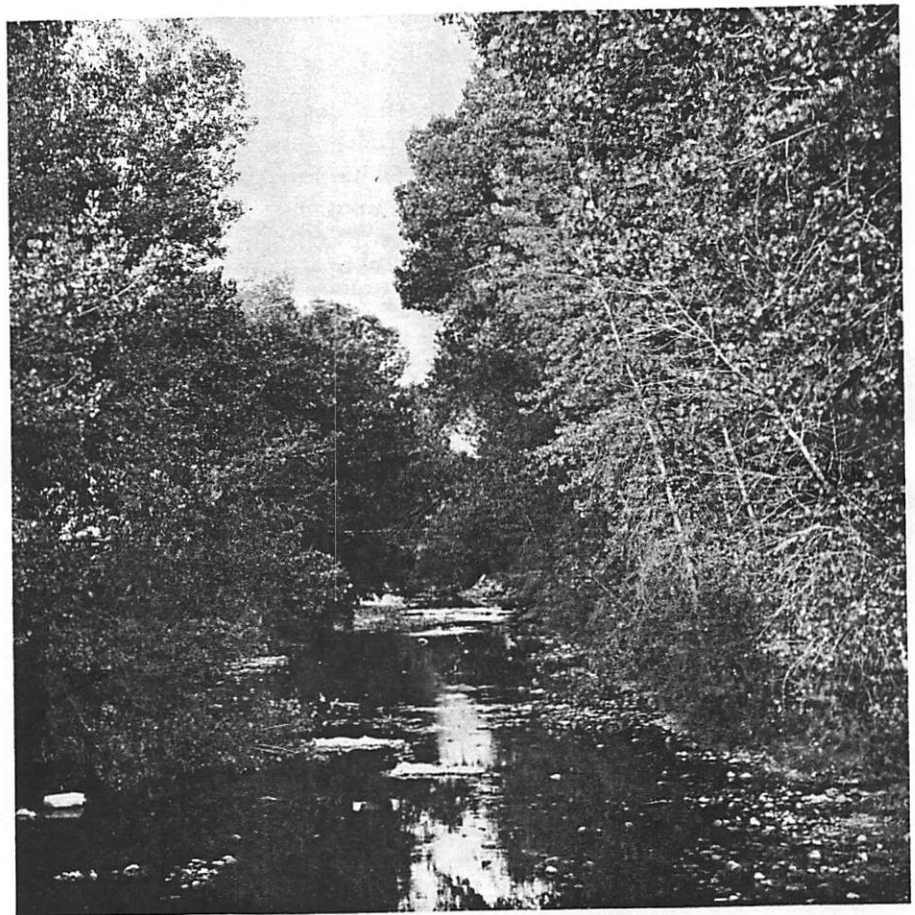
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Brigham Young strongly advocated the extension of major canals from Provo River into Salt Lake Valley. On one occasion he declared, "We intend to bring it [Provo River water] around the point of the mountain to Little Cottonwood, from there to Big Cottonwood, and lead its waters upon all the land from Provo Canyon to this [Salt Lake] City."²⁰

January 19, 1854, the Territorial Legislature approved a bill and established a law that created a commission that was given extensive powers to establishing the canal taking water from Provo River into the Jordan River.

Brigham Young knew the Kingdom of God could not flourish without water. He had deep concerns about the proper distribution of water and deplored its waste.

In an address in the Bowery, Salt Lake City, June 8, 1856, Brigham Young spoke critically of the methods of distribution of water. He declared "that one-half of the water is wasted; instead of being applied where and



Provo River as a beautiful stream of water running by the original fort.

when it is needed." He stated, "If people would take a little more pains in preparing ditches, gates and embankments for economically conducting water where it is most needed, it would be a very great advantage to them."²¹

A century and a quarter after the first white settlers crossed Provo River, a new use of Provo River has created a county-wide interest. The work week of people has fewer hours, industry, and agricultural pursuits have changed greatly; and the force of water as it flows in the river has little value for industry as a water force; but a new need of people has emerged.

People in the society that has been created need space that has interest in the area of recreation. It required many decades to learn of the beauty and interest for all groups at river-side, but this interest did ultimately get into action.

¹ William James Snow, "The Great Basin Before the Coming of the Mormons, p. 5. (PhD Dissertation on file at Brigham Young University Library).

² William R. Palmer, "Indian Names in Utah Geography," *The Utah Historical Quarterly*, Vol. I, Jan. 1928, p. 14.

³ Herbert E. Bolton, "Pageant in the Wilderness," *Utah Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 18, Oct. 1950, pp. 70-71.

⁴ William J. Snow, "Utah Indians and Spanish Slave Trade," *Utah Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 2, July 1929, p. 67.

⁵ George W. Bean, "Autobiography."

⁶ Dale L. Morgan, "Utah Before the Mormons," *Utah Historical Quarterly*, 1968, Vol. 36, p. 21.

⁷ George W. Bean, "Autobiography," p. 51.

⁸ Kate B. Carter, *Our Pioneer Heritage* Vol. 16, p. 376; (claim is made by the writer that this is the first irrigation company created in Utah).

⁹ *Laws of the Territory of Utah*, Ch. XIII, approved March 3, 1852.

¹⁰ *Millennial Star*, Vol. 11-13, p. 343.

¹¹ George W. Bean, "Autobiography," p. 51.

¹² *Journal History*, June 9, 1855.

¹³ *Millennial Star*, Vol. 11-13, p. 247.

¹⁴ *Laws of the Territory of Utah*, ch. 52, (approved, Jan. 21, 1853).

¹⁵ *Millennial Star*, Vol. XV, p. 286.

¹⁶ Captain Jesse A. Gove, *The Utah Expedition, 1857-1858*, pp. 302-303.

¹⁷ *Journal History*, March 5, 1853.

¹⁸ *Journal History*, March 29, 1855.

¹⁹ *Church Encyclopedia*, Book I, p. 284.

²⁰ Susan Young Gates and Leah D. Widstoe, *The Life Story of Brigham Young*, p. 132.

²¹ Kate B. Cacter, *Our Pioneer Heritage*, Vol. 16, p. 379.

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